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AUTHOR   Derlin, Roberta; McShannon, Judy
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ABSTRACT
              This paper describes the Action Research (AR) Team
model for joining classroom observations with collegial interaction
among university faculty, teaching assistants, and university
students to improve pedagogy and the retention of diverse students in
higher education. The paper includes a progress report of efforts to
develop the model and apply it on a pilot basis at New Mexico State
University. In the professional fields in which minorities and women
are presently under-represented, science, engineering, and
mathematics, the need for student retention efforts is seen to be
especially important. The AR teams are described as part of efforts
to retain minority students as they attempt to: (1) identify teaching ·
strategies and aspects of the classroom environment and dynamics of
classroom interaction that may impede student performance; (2) reduce
differential treatment of students and improve the pattern of
interactions; (3) increase use of non-stereotypical interactions,
materials, and activities; and (4) provide more equitable support and
motivation in the classroom for female and minority students. An
appendix compares the workforce composition for women,
African-Americans, and Hispanics in selected fields of employment and
composition for those groups in United States population. (Contains
28 references.) (MAH)

Action Research Teams

A Means to Transform Teaching and Empower

Underrepresented Students in the University Classroom

Dr. Roberta Derlin

and

Judy McShannon

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in American Higher Education

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Dr. Roberta Derlin
New Mexico State University
Educational Management and Development
Box 30001, Dept 3N
Las Cruces, NM 88003-0001
(505) 646-2139
rderlin@nmsu.edu

Judy McShannon
New Mexico State University
New Mexico Space Grant Consortium
Box 30001, Dept SG
Las Cruces, NM 88003-0001
(505) 646-6115
jmcshann@pathfinder.nmsu.edu

Abstract

A model for professional development of university faculty and instructional staff that fosters academic achievement and understanding of under-represented students will be the focus of this session. The Action Research Teams (hereafter AR Teams), envisioned in the model of professional development, are mechanisms to actively engage university faculty and students in a process of on-going formative evaluation to encourage the implementation of strategies to improve classroom dynamics immediately. *Action Research* is an ongoing effort to reflect on educational practice in order to identify and implement improvements. In the educational setting, participants come to view themselves as capable of locating the resources to significantly improve students' learning experiences. In the model, AR Teams couple classroom observations with collegial interaction among university faculty, teaching assistants, and university students to create a bottom up model for improved pedagogy and positive changes to improve the retention of diverse students in higher education. In addition to a discussion of the AR Team model, planning efforts to further develop the model and apply it on a pilot basis are discussed. This session should particularly benefit conference attendees interested in enhancing faculty interaction with under-represented students, improved pedagogy to enhance teaching and retain diverse students, and in fostering institutional change that is long lived and effective in improving the life chances for minority students and women.

Introduction

U.S. Department of Labor statistics (1995) suggest that the participation of women and minorities varies greatly among various labor categories. Women and minorities find employment in social services, health services, and education careers, but are less likely to be employed in engineering and research careers. At the same time, demographic shifts in the U.S. population suggest that minorities constitute a growing proportion of the available workforce while unemployment rates among minority job-seekers remain high. Similarly, women are more actively seeking employment opportunities, although their representation among the various labor categories remains concentrated in the helping professions (U.S. Department of Labor, 1995).

These employment realities faced by under-represented groups suggest that educational opportunities for women and minorities that will encourage more equitable participation in the workforce are critical, not only as a means to achieve social equity, but as a means to preserve economic stability (Martin, 1994). While women and minority students have been entering our universities in increasing numbers since the advent of equal opportunity in education legislation during the 1960's and 1970's, student retention has become a persistent problem for American higher education. In those professional fields in which minorities and women are presently under-represented in the workforce, science, engineering, and mathematics (hereafter SEM), student retention

is especially problematic. The National Science Foundation reported that nationally the attrition rate for SEM fields is 60 percent, with the rate of loss estimated to be 35 percent between the freshman and sophomore years, suggesting that the early years of university experience are critical in the retention of SEM students (National Research Council, 1991).

In our home state, New Mexico, 50 percent of the students entering college SEM departments are women, while 72 percent of the students who ultimately complete their degrees in SEM fields are men. In some post-secondary institutions in New Mexico, as many as 50 percent of the women qualified for SEM programs fail to complete their academic training in these fields (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

Due to low retention rates of minority students in higher education across the United States, much attention and research has been directed toward the issues and concerns of minority students nationwide. Low student retention rates are the subject of study by institutional research departments and higher education scholars (Solís, 1995). While many factors influence a university student's decision to remain or leave a particular field of study or the pursuit of higher education entirely, one factor considered to be relevant to minority students is what some argue is the openly hostile atmosphere minority students encounter within the higher education environment (Bailey, Tisdell, and Cervero, 1994).

While most professors do not consciously treat students unfairly, differential treatment often occurs. Egalitarian beliefs among faculty may be widely held, but unconscious patterns of interaction among faculty and their students may suggest to minority students that they are not valued class members. Sadker and Sadker (1994) found that faculty interactions are sensitive to the gender, race, and ethnic background of the students. They also observed that faculty interact in a positive, supportive, and motivational way with students from whom they expect the most. Students are less apt to learn from someone they feel doesn't like them or who doesn't expect them to learn.

Bailey, Tisdell, and Cervero (1994) identify that minority students are excluded from opportunities to be mentored by senior faculty or are often assigned to minority faculty although the student's academic interests may be more closely aligned with those of non-minority faculty members. They report from an American Association of University Women 1992 study that indicates that Anglo males typically receive more classroom attention and more positive reinforcement by faculty. Also, Moses (1990) found that Anglo males are most often chosen to be spokespersons, reporters, or leaders of classroom peer study groups even when female students outnumber males. This work suggests that the dynamics of university classroom interactions are not simply the result of faculty behavior, but reflect the attitudes and interaction patterns of peers as well.

Differential treatment of students in classroom settings is not an experience minority students encounter for the first time in higher education settings. The work of Graysol and Martin (1990) in elementary and secondary education suggests that K-12 teachers also provide more opportunities for Anglo males to respond in class and that females and minority students receive less cognitive time and teaching attention.

Ultimately, differential treatment of students related to factors such as gender, race, and ethnicity in the educational delivery system can only lead to unfair and often detrimental consequences for students. Practices in higher education that may send out messages that the thoughts and contributions of minority and women students are not worth listening to, or even considering, can, and should be, the focus of varied methods of staff development to create positive learning environments for all students.

Enhancing Equity in the University Classroom

Diversity training can provide faculty the tools to improve classroom interactions with diverse students. While professional development can aid professors in identifying areas of pedagogy that may result in differential treatment of women and minorities, traditional models of professional development opportunities related to equity issues commonly are imposed from the top down. Mandated training sessions regarding equity are often times merely tolerated by faculty and at worst are resented

as another bureaucratic requirement imposed by administrators who
are far removed from the reality of classroom experience. At
best, top-down strategies have minimal effect on the behavior of
faculty because their expertise and goodwill are not recognized
or utilized in the training. While knowledge about educational
innovations may be shared within the confines of top down
approaches and adoption of new methods may occur, maintaining new
strategies after training opportunities cease occurs far less
frequently (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978).

In contrast, an action research model of professional
development fosters collaborative work as participants in the
educational process engage in active inquiry and reflection about
the redefinition and reformation of schooling experiences for
diverse students in the learning community. *Action Research* is an
ongoing effort to reflect on educational practice in order to
identify and implement improvements.

AR Teams in the University Setting

In the professional development model for university faculty
and instructional staff that we propose to foster academic
achievement and understanding of under-represented students, AR
Teams will be composed of an individual instructor, a graduate
assistant, and students participating in the particular course.
AR Teams will participate in on-going formative evaluations to
identify teaching strategies and aspects of the classroom
environment and dynamics of classroom interaction that may impede
student performance. Classroom observations will be utilized to

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assist in the identification of areas for improvement and the
results of the periodic observations will be used to foster team
discussion and reflection to encourage the implementation of
change strategies immediately.

The use of AR Teams follows current wisdom regarding
educational change and reform. Fullan (1995) suggests that

> neither top-down nor bottom-up strategies for
> educational reform work. What is required is a more
> sophisticated blend of the two...The way that systems
> change for the better is that individuals and small
> groups of individuals intersect, and find kindred
> spirits, locally and centrally. Breakthroughs occur
> when productive connections add up to create growing
> pressure for systems to change. The more that top-down
> and bottom-up forces are coordinated, the more likely
> that complex systems will move toward greater
> effectiveness.

At the heart of the action research team model is the desire
to support the development of a culture of research by all
stakeholders in the learning community. Based on the literature
on change, true change takes place as participants identify their
own desires (Fullan, 1995). The writers experience, as well as
the research, support the transformative impact of engaging
faculty, instructional staff, and students in the action research
process.

The model uses graduate assistants trained in classroom
observation techniques to assist faculty to collaborate with each
other and with students to identify current practices that
warrant modification. Through self motivating strategies and
collegial interaction, participating faculty, instructional
staff, and students access new styles of teaching that encourage

the empowerment of under-represented students in the learning community.

In this action research program, faculty examine the impact of their behavior on classroom dynamics and bring professional judgment to the process, which is an important factor in improving teaching (Porter & Brophy, 1988). The analysis of the impact of their own classroom interactions on learning fosters the process of pedagogical change.

The action research team model has three major objectives:

1. reduce differential treatment of students and improve the pattern of interactions as indicated by classroom observations;

2. increase use of non-stereotypical interactions, materials, and activities; and

3. more equitable support and motivation in the classroom for female and minority students.

The Action Research Team model also equips students with knowledge, leadership skills, and sensitivity to foster academic success for themselves and others. The program can be a vehicle that will enable students upon graduation to be instruments of empowerment for the future. As students pursue their own careers, the exposure to culturally sensitive teaching during their university experience will allow them to apply similar skills in their own professional settings reaching far beyond the borders of a university campus.

Description of AR Team Program

Over the period of an academic year, AR Teams will meet once
a month with facilitators. Initially these meetings will provide
opportunities to explore general issues of classroom dynamics.
During the following months, data regarding the frequency of
observed behaviors in the classroom that may impede student
achievement will be collected during one-half hour sessions each
month. The following month, the AR Teams will meet with the
facilitator to discuss their ideas for improved classroom
dynamics and to plan for implementation of new strategies to
improve equity. Through this program, faculty and students will
become aware of unconscious personal behaviors that result in
differential treatment and take actions to reduce their
occurrence and possible negative consequences.

Seeking Institutional Support for the AR Team Effort

For the AR Team effort to be successful in changing faculty
and peer interaction patterns, the model seeks to combine top-
down institutional support with bottom-up action and reflection
by faculty and student peers. Since universities are unlikely to
change their teaching methods solely because it is the "fair" or
"right" thing to do, the AR Team model's implementation includes
demonstrating how the program supports institutional needs and
concerns. In planning for the pilot program, we plan to
concentrate our efforts on the following arguments. Improved
academic success, retention rates, and graduation rates by

minority students achieved through the implementation of AR

Teams:

1) will enhance the university's competitiveness for large

   federal teaching and research grants,

2) will provide enhanced student support of faculty

   research, and

3) this improved access to external funds and student

   support on faculty research will enhance the university's

   ability to recruit quality faculty.

Seeking Personal Commitment for the AR Team Effort

One of the key features of any change is for the

participants to find a reason to participate in the process. The

most common question is, "What's in it for me?" Benefits,

rewards, and incentives that have clear implications for the AR

Team participants have the greatest likelihood of generating the

necessary levels of commitment. Complicating the development of

the required incentives is the fact that not all participants are

anticipated to have the same wants and needs to be fulfilled. In

addition, the wants and needs of individual participants may

change over time.

Theus (1989) classifies personal incentives as monetary,

non-financial, and normative. Monetary incentives include regular

compensation, cash rewards, prizes, travel money and research

funding and grants. Non-financial incentives include symbolic

awards and recognitions such as honorary titles. Normative

incentives include peer pressure, student pressure and inclusion

in university governance.

Monetary incentives are one means that can be used to
support the AR Team effort by building AR Team participation into
the faculty evaluation process. When universities implement an
average pay increase for university faculty and staff (e.g. 5%);
generally, all faculty and staff will receive a portion
(e.g. 1-2%), while the remainder (e.g. 3-4%) is dispersed based
on merit. If AR Team participation were considered in the
university evaluation process, participating faculty would
receive monetary incentives through regular compensation for
their successful participation in the program. Alternatively,
cash awards or additional travel allocations could be used as
methods of providing AR Team faculty participants with monetary
incentives.

Considering the resource constraints universities face, non-
financial incentives may be a more feasible means to provide
support to AR Team participants than providing monetary
incentives. Providing institutional recognition of AR Team
participants at annual award ceremonies or in institutional
publications and considering AR Team membership during tenure and
promotion reviews are examples to be considered.

Normative incentives can be provided to faculty and student
AR Team participants by inviting recognized prestigious faculty
to be among program initiators and by involving students and
faculty governance leaders in program planning. Support of the
president, deans, and department heads for faculty participation

will also be solicited to provide normative incentives for this program. The support of key positional persons in the university and the participating faculty will encompass top-down and bottom-up strategies to ensure the AR Team effort's success.

Implementation Considerations for AR Team Efforts

Implementing AR Teams as a method to foster enhanced faculty interaction with under-represented students, improve pedagogy to enhance teaching and retain diverse students, and foster institutional change that is long lived and effective in improving the life chances for minority students and women, it is important to recognize the unique aspects of the university setting. The composition of the university community, both faculty and students, the organizational culture of the institution, and the broader cultural environment in which the university fulfills its mission will all influence the implementation of the AR Team effort.

We know from the research on effective change processes that incorporating these unique aspects of institutional life and providing an opportunity for adaptation of the program are necessary to initial success and will be critical to long lived sustenance of the AR Team model's implementation. To foster a sustained effort, we recommend a pilot effort as an initial step to identify issues related to classroom dynamics within a particular university setting (Fullan, 1985; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Rogers, 1962).

In our efforts to pursue implementation of the AR Teams at

our home institution, New Mexico State University, we are
presently working with academic and administrative staff to
develop a pilot study for the campus. The following description
is a progress report of these efforts.

Proposed Pilot AR Team Program

A number of unconscious patterns of behavior related to
classroom dynamics and differential treatment of students have
been shown to occur through research in educational settings
(Bailey, Tisdell, & Cervero, 1994; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Tisdell
& McLaurin, 1994; AAUW, 1990; Graysol & Martin, 1990). Behavior
patterns that have been observed in K-12 settings include the
number of interactions between faculty and students, the length
of time the faculty waits for a response from the student, the
type of response the faculty gives the student (praise,
remediation, criticism, acceptance, ignoring), or the kinds of
questions the faculty asks the student (simple recall, stating
opinion with reasons, summarizing, organizing information)
(Graysol & Martin, 1990).

In the pilot study we propose, these behavior patterns are
being considered as possible targets for the observation process.
However, the instructional approaches used in the university
setting and the relationships among faculty and students in the
university are quite different from K-12 traditions of teaching
practice and traditional K-12 student-teacher relationships. To
explore the magnitude of these perceived differences in the
instructional environment, we propose to solicit input from

university students about their perceptions of classroom dynamics and their experiences with differential treatment by faculty and student peers.

Student Input

Input from graduating seniors from the various colleges will be solicited through surveys and/or interviews. While there is evidence to suggest that minority students and women are often reticent to participate in classroom settings and may be particularly hesitant to share experiences regarding differential treatment or negative classroom dynamics (Tisdell & McLaurin, 1994), we propose that graduating seniors are free to be completely honest with the interviewers because they are leaving the university and anything they share about their experiences can not negatively influence them. In addition, these students have considerable experience with the challenges to equity students encounter and were able to survive these challenges for more than four years. From their input, additional behaviors will be identified to become the foci of classroom observations.

Collection of Examples of Differential Treatment

For the Pilot AR Team Program, faculty volunteers will be video taped while teaching class to collect examples of the differential treatment of students by faculty and of classroom dynamics that may impede student achievement. These videos will be edited into a format suitable for training Pilot Program AR Teams.

Pilot Program AR Team members, will serve as observers and

data collectors. The Pilot Program AR Team members will be
trained about the behaviors to be observed, the data collection
instruments, and given practice in observational techniques using
the prepared video tapes.

Pilot Program Classroom Selection

The students at the greatest risk of attrition are the
freshmen and sophomores (National Research Council, 1991).
Therefore, we will solicit the support of faculty who teach the
first and second year undergraduate courses. Four levels of
faculty teach these targeted courses; tenured faculty, tenure-
track faculty, non-tenured faculty and graduate teaching
assistants. One instructor at each level from each of the five
colleges (Colleges of Engineering, Education, Arts and Science,
Agricultural and Home Economics, and Business) will be solicited
to participate in the Pilot Program AR Team effort. This
selection strategy will result in twenty classes participating in
the pilot program.

AR Team Program Example

To examine how the results of classroom observations will be
utilized by the AR Teams, an example using sample observational
data is provided below. The sample is based on one thirty minute
observation of a graduate level education course.

A simple example of differential classroom treatment is the
number of times a faculty member interacts with each student
identified by racial/ethnic and gender categories. Figure 1
presents sample data of the number of interactions recorded

during a one-half hour observation for each ethnic/racial and gender category.

Number of Interactions		
Student Group	Number of Interactions	
	Male	Female
European-American	////	////
African-American		
Hispanic-American	///	///
Asian-American/Pacific Islander		
Native-American		
Other		

Figure 1
Number of Faculty-Student Interactions by Ethnic/Racial
and Gender Categories

When examining the data in Figure 1, it might appear there is not much disparity between the various student groups. There is an equal number of interactions for European-American males and females, and Hispanic-American students have only one less interaction.

However, when the AR Team calculates the percentage of students composing the class by ethnic/racial and gender categories and compares this information with the percentage of total faculty-student interactions that occurred, a different picture of the classroom environment emerges. Figure 2 compares the percentage of faculty-student interactions and classroom composition by ethnic/racial and gender categories.
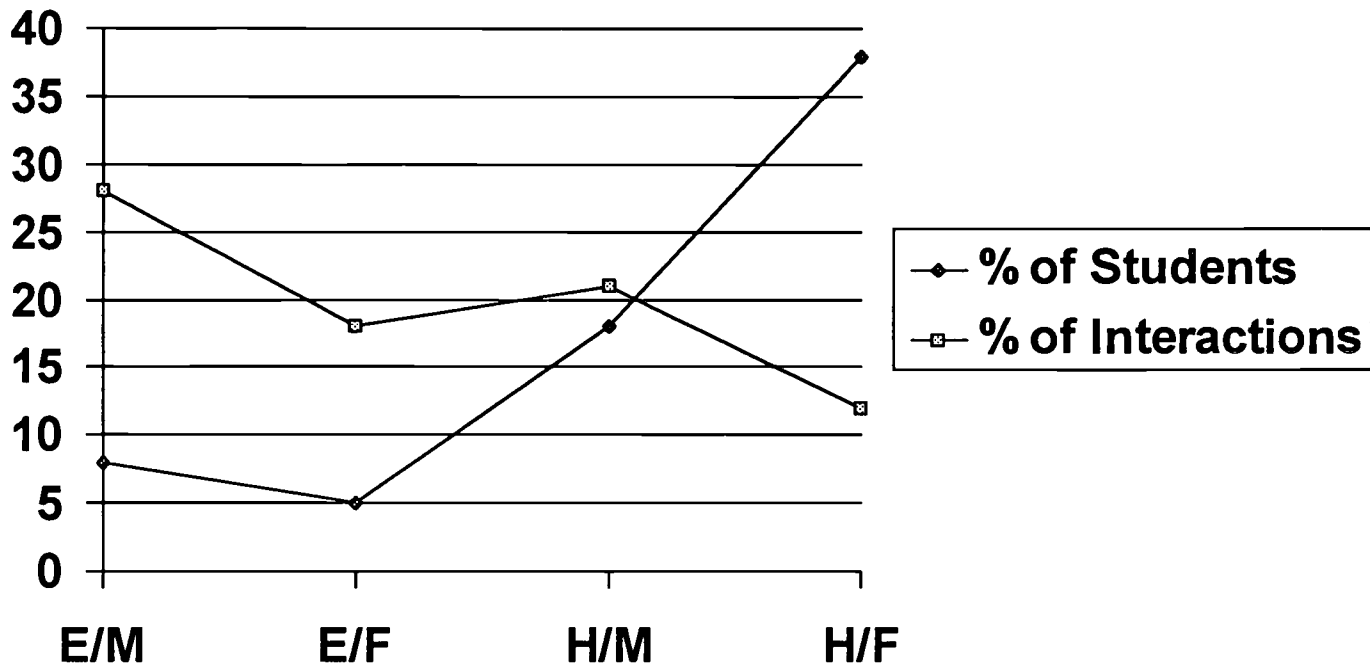
Figure 2
Comparison of the Percentage of Faculty-Student Interactions
and Class Composition by Ethnic/Racial and Gender Categories

The additional analysis by the AR Team now identifies that
while the European-American males make up only 8% of the class,
they received 28% of the interactions with the faculty.
Hispanic-American females, however, who make up 38% of the class,
received only 12% of the faculty interactions.

The AR Teams will discuss this information and the faculty
member involved can then evaluate these results in light of the
goals of reducing interaction disparity among the students.
Further AR Team discussion will then occur to identify strategies
that can be implemented to facilitate more equitable faculty-
student interaction patterns.

Conclusion

The AR Team example provided, and the AR Team model
proposed, identifies the challenges to be encountered in
developing strategies to improve pedagogy and enhance the
academic success of minority students and women. The AR Team
model's focus on individual inquiry, reflection, and positive
action is complex, time-consuming, and relies on institutional
and personal commitment to create improvement in the educational
environment. These challenges, however, should not be perceived
as obstacles. When faculty and students examine the impact of
their own behaviors on classroom dynamics, bring personal
judgment to the process of change, and analyze the impact of
their behavior on the learning environment, powerful forces will
coalesce to achieve personal transformation and positive action
to improve teaching, retain diverse students, and foster
institutional improvement that is long lived and effective in
improving the life chances for minority students and women.

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Appendix A
Workforce Composition for Women, African-Americans, and Hispanics
Comparing Selected Field of Employment and
Composition for Women, African-Americans,
and Hispanics in U.S. Population

Field	Women	African/Am	Hispanic
Social Services	80%	17%	7%
Health Services	79%	13%	6%
Elem/Secondary Education	74%	11%	7%
Finance, Insurance	58%	9%	6%
Legal	55%	5%	4%
College/University Education	52%	10%	5%
Business	51%	8%	8%
Research/Development/Testing	43%	6%	4%
Engineering	21%	3%	5%

Table 1
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics
Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey (1995)
http://stals.bls.gov.80/cpsaatab.html.empstat

	Women	African/Am	Hispanic
% of U.S. Population	51%	12%	9%

Table 2
Source: U.S. Census Bureau
1990 U.S. National Census Data
http://cedr.lbl.gov/cdrom/lookup

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Signature: *Dr. Roberta L. Derlin*	Position: Associate Professor
Printed Name: Dr. Roberta L. Derlin	Organization: New Mexico State University
Address: Dept of EMD - Box 3N New Mexico State University Las Cruces, New Mexico 88003	Telephone Number: (505) 646-3825
	Date: September 23, 1996